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Coordination and integration of international statistical programmes

Global integrated presentation of the work plans of the international organizations in statistical methodology

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report responds to the issues raised by the Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its nineteenth session (New York, 10–12 February 1998) on the pilot global integrated presentation of the work plans of the international organizations in statistical methodology (paras. 1–5); it also provides the United Nations Secretariat's observations on the recommendations made by the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission to explore new approaches to the structure and operation of the Statistical Commission, some of which have a close relationship to the subject of the global presentation (paras. 6 and 7). Points for discussion are included (para. 8).

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Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its nineteenth session (New York, 10–12 February 1998) considered a pilot global integrated presentation (global presentation) of work that had been developed by the United Nations Statistics Division, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (see E/CN.3/1999/20, paras. 33 and 34), in response to a request by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-ninth session.[1] An oral report was made by the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division to the Working Group and an Internet demonstration of the global presentation was given. It was pointed out to the Working Group that the global presentation was intended to cover only methodological outputs of international agencies and that it did not cover data-collection or technical cooperation activities. The Working Group (see E/CN.3/1999/20, paras. 33 and 34):

> "(a) Welcomed the pilot effort as a first step in the direction of a global presentation of work plans;
>
> "(b) Made suggestions and posed questions concerning (i) inclusion of previously produced methodological publications, (ii) the range of organizations to be included, (iii) possibilities of linkages to home pages of city groups, (iv) inclusion of actual texts of classifications, (v) specification of intended users and uses, (vi) relationship to similar or related sets of data available in some regions, (vii) arrangements for maintaining the database over time and (viii) possible development of a catalogue of outputs with hyper-links to the home pages of other organizations where the details would be available;
>
> "(c) Requested the Division to continue development of the system along the lines outlined by the Director, present a more elaborated product to the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session and report to the Commission on the issues raised in subparagraph (b) above."

2. The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities considered the subject at its thirty-second session (New York, 10–12 February 1998) (see E/CN.3/1999/22, para. 2 (b)). There was a range of views on the direction of the global presentation. Some members of the Subcommittee expressed the view that it did not meet the needs of the Statistical Commission. The Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were clear in their affirmation at the Subcommittee meeting, and in other venues, that they would not provide any more information than they were providing currently for the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) global presentation of work. The United Nations Statistics Division took note of these concerns and also of the possible impact that the recommendations of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission (see E/CN.3/1999/23, annex) to explore new approaches to the structure and operation of the Statistical Commission might have on the final form of the information required for the global presentation.

3. The present report attempts first to address the points and concerns noted above. Then, because of the close relationship between the subject of the global presentation and some of the recommendations of the ad hoc group, this report goes on to consider some operational aspects regarding both the global presentation and the recommendations of the ad hoc group.

I. Response to the matters raised by the Working Group

4. The United Nations Secretariat would like to respond to the issues raised in the report of the Working Group in the order listed in paragraph 1 (b) above:

(a) The United Nations Secretariat believes there should be a companion document to the global presentation, namely, an annotated list of previously adopted standards. This would be prepared and maintained by the United Nations Statistics Division and would be placed on the Division Web site with hyper-links to available sites containing detailed information about each standard;

(b) The Secretariat believes that the global presentation will only be successful if all organizations are included. As mentioned above both OECD and Eurostat had indicated that they would not provide information for the global presentation since they were already providing information for the CES global presentation. To resolve this problem, Eurostat and OECD have agreed to the Division's proposal to enter the information for Eurostat and OECD into the global presentation;

(c) Hyper-links will be provided to the Web sites of other organizations and city groups as required;

(d) It is not intended that the actual text of standards should appear in the global presentation; however, linkages

will be available to those sites where the actual text is provided;

(e) The users will be the national statistical offices (including both those that are members of the Statistical Commission and those that are not), international agencies and, in general, anyone who wishes to know about current standards activities in the global international system; this subject will be covered in more detail in section II below;

(f) One of the main differences between this and any other data set and presentation lies in the fact that it would be a global presentation. It would draw on information available in some regions as set out in (b) above. Second it would only contain information on methodological work. The developers of the global presentation made a decision to concentrate, at least initially, on methodological work. The agencies believed that coordinating and setting priorities for the development and revision of statistical standards were at present of a higher order of importance to the Statistical Commission than coordination of data collection or technical cooperation. Moreover, they felt an incremental approach was called for. If the global presentation succeeded for methodological work, then the Commission could decide if it wished to expand the presentation (the basic systems design and programming would allow for this expansion if warranted). In addition, with respect to both data collection and technical cooperation, substantial coordination was taking place at the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities. Another important difference is that the global presentation is a searchable database on the Web. It is searchable according to the ACC Programme Classification for statistical activities and by agency. These search criteria seem to be consistent with the level of functionality commonly available today in similar types of databases;

(g) The United Nations Statistics Division will assume responsibility for maintaining the database and the associated Web sites (the global presentation and the annotated list of previously adopted standards). It is anticipated (except as discussed in subpara. (b) above) that agencies will enter the information directly into the database. To the extent that requests for data need to be made to organizations, the Division will make them. Based on experience with the pilot, it is estimated that the total time required to enter the information for one methodological entry is less than one hour. Because of this and given the relatively few methodological activities that any agency is involved with at any particular time, the entry process has not been perceived to be unduly burdensome. For that reason also, it seemed counter-productive to try to establish any automatic procedures for obtaining the information from existing agency sites;

(h) As mentioned in (a), (b) and (c) above, hyperlinks to the relevant Web sites of other organizations will be available, as is now the case for the city group page on the Division Web site.

5. At this time, the content of the global presentation is the same as that presented to the Working Group in February 1998.

II. Observations on the recommendations of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission

6. The recommendations of the ad hoc group, as set out in its report to the Statistical Commission (E/CN.3/1999/23, annex, para. 1) are:

(a) To present a global programme of statistical (methodological) development work;

(b) To have the Statistical Commission meet annually;

(c) To give the Bureau of the Commission more of a steering role;

(d) To promote inclusiveness of countries in the Commission's work, in particular by creating an "international cyber platform" on the Internet;

(e) To further improve the focus of documentation for meetings of the Commission by systematically using a standard format for all programme elements;

(f) To consider modalities for enhancing the involvement of important international users of statistics.

7. The above recommendations will be discussed in the order they were presented, as follows:

(a) The United Nations Secretariat believes that the global presentation discussed in section I above is supportive of and consistent with the first recommendation in the report of the ad hoc group. Appendix I of the report of the ad hoc group provides an example of an expansion of the basic approach that was taken in the pilot programme; the global presentation can be easily modified to follow the format suggested in that appendix. While the appendix calls for more information than is in the pilot, the additional information is not considered to be significant in scale and the estimate of time needed to input the information is not expected to change dramatically. As mentioned in paragraph 4 (a) above, the United Nations Secretariat believes that the

global presentation would be complemented by an annotated list of previously adopted standards. The Commission would then have available to it the annotated list of previously completed standards and the integrated database of current and planned activities in the format described in appendix I of the report of the ad hoc group. These can be used by the Commission to set priorities and monitor the development of standards over a longer time-horizon than is now possible. These two databases will also be a useful resource for the rapporteur proposed by the ad hoc group (see E/CN.3/1999/23, annex, para. 13 (e));

(b) The procedures required to realize the request of the Working Group to hold annual meetings of the Statistical Commission are set out in the report of the Secretary-General on options for the meetings of the Statistical Commission and its Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and coordination (E/CN.3/1999/24);

(c) The United Nations Secretariat:

(i) Notes that, if the past practice of the Commission is followed, namely, finishing the session early in the afternoon of the last day, it should be possible for the Bureau of the Commission to meet at the end of the last day. Meetings before the Commission might be more problematic unless the start of the Commission was delayed somewhat or the Bureau was to meet on the Friday before the Commission. This last option would, of course, mean additional expense and burden on the Bureau members. In any event, the World Electronic Statistics Platform discussed in subparagraph (d) below would aid the Bureau, and all members, in monitoring follow-up to the decisions of the Commission;

(ii) Agrees with the proposed composition of the Bureau (Chairman, three Vice-chairs and Rapporteur) and especially with the flexibility provided to the Chairman to invite additional participants. This flexibility is important with respect to providing substitutes for Bureau members who may not be able to attend and to allow for such additional participants as may be needed for effective decision-making;

(d) The Secretariat:

(i) Believes that the two searchable Web sites described in paragraph 4 (g) above can be part of an international cyber platform and should promote connectivity among the actors in the international system. As discussed by Commission and Working Group members and observers, one of the major impediments to greater connectivity is the perception and/or reality of the fact that some of the system enjoy greater access to information than others. This situation can arrive, for example, because some are more limited in their travel resources or because they do not have the same access to electronic networks as others;

(ii) Notes that, even in cases where travel resources are not a problem, it is becoming increasingly important for the actors in the international statistical system to engage in virtual meetings between the actual physical ones. Increasingly, decisions need to be taken before decision makers have the luxury of a physical meeting. At the same time, it is becoming ever more important for substantive work to be continued between physical meetings. The World Electronic Statistics Platform, described in the report of the ad hoc group (E/CN.3/1999/23, annex, paras. 1 (d) and 31–33 and appendix III), should provide more transparency in the global statistical system. Of course, until all countries have equal access to the Internet we must be careful not to exclude anyone because they do not yet have such access. The Division offers to provide support for the World Electronic Statistics Platform. In particular, the Division will look for opportunities in the near future to sponsor a cyber expert group. It appears that, in addition to the technologies listed in the report of the ad hoc group (E/CN.3/1999/23, appendix III, para. 1), some technologies such as Lotus Notes (some national statistical offices have made extensive use of Lotus Notes in organizing their information) can be used as the basis for a cyber expert group;

(e) The United Nations Secretariat continues to support the use of standard formats for documents for the Statistical Commission and has increasingly applied them in recent Commission sessions. The Secretariat notes that the success of these formats is dependent, in large measure, on the willingness of the authors of documents to follow them;

(f) With respect to:

(i) The participation of users from the private sector, there are a large number of non-governmental organizations (about 1,300) that, being in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, may therefore attend sessions of the Commission as observers. Some of these can participate in the proceedings of the Commission at their request (as is the case of the International Statistical Institute) and

others can participate at the request of the Commission (as is the case of the International Association for Research in Income and Wealth). It is the practice of the United Nations Secretariat to notify of the dates and agenda of the sessions of the Statistical Commission the (small) number of non-governmental organizations that the Secretariat believes have an interest in and can contribute to the work of the Commission at each session;

(ii) Other parts of the private sector mentioned in the report of the ad hoc group, namely, multinational companies, consulting firms and development banks, the Secretariat is able to consult with such organizations and the Commission can invite them to attend and participate in its sessions;

(iii) The Secretariat effort in relation to the private sector, it could be extended if the Commission wishes, so as to involve either only Secretariat consultation with relevant organizations or invitations to attend Commission sessions.

III. Points for discussion

8. The Commission may wish to consider:

(a) Whether the approach of concentrating on methodological work in the global integrated presentation is the correct one;

(b) Whether the United Nations Statistics Division should also develop a Web page of completed methodological work;

(c) Whether to change the model global presentation according to the approach outlined in appendix I of the report of the ad hoc group;

(d) Whether the Division should attempt to organize a cyber expert group;

(e) To what extent the Statistical Commission and the United Nations Secretariat should reach out for input from users in the private sector.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1997, Supplement No. 4* (E/1997/24), para. 100 (c).